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AUTHOR McNaught, Carmel; Anwyl, John
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ABSTRACT

In the Australian higher education scene the importance of recognizing effective teaching is gaining increasing prominence. Issues of academic accountability and the increasing scarcity of financial resources for higher education have added pressure to the debate about what constitutes quality in higher education. Central to this debate is the issue of the extrinsic rewards available for teaching competence or teaching excellence. Within the older universities, excellence in research within traditional disciplines has been rewarded by research grants and by promotion procedures much more than excellence in teaching has been. Within the post-1987 universities there are pressures to develop high level research profiles. This study looks at one strategy which has been used in an attempt to redress the research/teaching imbalance and promote quality in higher education, namely that of awards for teaching excellence. An analysis of survey responses from 37 Australian institutions of higher education about how they viewed teaching awards is reported, together with comment on the possible benefits and drawbacks of these awards. Suggestions are made for modifying them in a way which deals with the criticisms of some existing programs. Contains 17 references. (Author/GLR)

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CSHE Research Working Papers 93.1

Carmel McNaught and John Anwyl

Awards for teaching excellence at Australian universities

Centre for the Study of Higher Education

The University of Melbourne Parkville 3052 Vic. Australia

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Awards for teaching excellence at Australian universities

Carmel McNaught and John Anwyl
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
University of Melbourne

Abstract

In the Australian higher education scene the importance of recognising effective teaching is gaining increasing prominence. Issues of academic accountability and the increasing scarcity of financial resources for higher education have added pressure to the debate about what constitutes quality in higher education. Central to this debate is the issue of the extrinsic rewards available for teaching competence or teaching excellence. Within the older universities excellence in research within traditional disciplines has been rewarded by research grants and by promotion procedures much more than excellence in teaching has been in the past. Within the post-1987 universities (the former colleges of advanced education) there are pressures to develop high level research profiles. This study looks at one strategy which has been used in an attempt to redress the research / teaching imbalance and promote quality in higher education - namely that of awards for teaching excellence. In 1991 a survey was conducted of 37 higher education institutions in Australia about how they viewed teaching awards. The analysis of responses is reported, together with comment on the possible benefits and drawbacks of these awards. Suggestions are made for modifying them in a way which deals with the criticisms of some existing schemes and results in a more robust and appealing model.

American origins of university awards for teaching excellence

Awards for teaching excellence have been part of the higher education system in the USA for many years.

For example, the University of California, Berkeley, has had a scheme for distinguished teaching awards since 1957. There has been explicit provision for teaching awards in government education legislation such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) Act of 1950. Typically, these awards have been given to individuals on the basis of prepared portfolios about their teaching, have involved monetary rewards and have been publicised quite widely. Often the awards in the USA have been presented at a banquet with extensive media coverage. Several descriptions of award recipients have been reported in the literature with articles titles like 'The kind of teacher we all hoped we could be' (Ryan 1990), 'Question all answers' (Barre 1989) and 'A mind for all seasons' (Bailey 1982). These articles present case studies of award recipients presumably in the belief that other teachers in higher education could learn something from the styles exemplified by these teachers.

In one study of nine professors who had received awards, all described their style of teaching as being comparable to a theatrical performance (Kelly and Kelly 1982). However, in a study of students' perceptions of outstanding teachers, the students clearly valued the personal relationships they had with the teachers they admired more highly than the actual classroom performance of these teachers (Jacobson 1982). Good teaching is an extremely complex activity and different participants in the process may have differing perceptions about what is important. This must be kept in mind when making judgments about constitutes excellence in teaching.

Overall, in several American universities there appears to be a commitment to the use of teaching awards as a strategy for improving the quality of teaching. It is therefore surprising that the underlying assumption that there is a clear link between teaching awards and quality in higher education has not been discussed more closely. Certainly, in one study (Jacobsen 1989) at Messiah College in Pennsylvania where teaching awards have been established for many years, the comparison of individual teaching effectiveness measures in 20 categories over several years indicated that the introduction of the award incentive programme had had no significant impact on teaching effectiveness. Tollefson and

Tracy (1983) examined self-reported teaching behaviours of award-winning and non-award winning university staff. The staff were matched for academic rank and field; no differences were found between the groups on five dimensions of teaching behaviour. These studies at individual institutions indicate a need to be cautious about assuming a strong link between teaching awards and improved quality in higher education.

As many Australian universities have recently introduced teaching award schemes or are planning to do so, it is timely to examine them in some detail.

The nature and extent of teaching awards at Australian universities

In September 1991 37 higher education institutions in Australia (those listed in the July 1991 Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) list of higher education institutions) were invited to provide information about their position with respect to awards for teaching excellence. Documentation was requested about any existing or proposed teaching award schemes. If a decision not to implement a teaching award scheme had been taken, any relevant documentation was also requested.

Thirty-three institutions replied. Some brief information was available on the other four institutions (for example from Lewis 1991). Of these 37 institutions, 18 have some form of teaching award scheme, though in three of these cases the scheme was part of a broader programme which included other categories of distinguished service. Six other institutions are proposing to implement a scheme for teaching awards; four of these schemes are expected to be implemented in 1992. So 24/37 institutions consider some form of teaching award scheme to be valuable. As these awards are a relatively recent innovation in Australian universities (the first apparently were in 1988 at the University of Queensland), this proportion represents a strong move to use this strategy. Indeed, this is a remarkably strong adoption of this innovation and coincides with the upsurge in the debate on what constitutes quality in higher education. It is also remarkable that both the older and newer universities are introducing teaching award schemes, so that right across our diverse system of higher education this specific strategy is becoming increasingly popular.

Nine institutions have firmly decided that they will not introduce any teaching award scheme. Another four institutions are undecided at this stage.

The information given by institutions was full in some cases, and somewhat sketchier in other cases. The description given below is intended to give an overview of the nature of teaching awards in Australian universities. It is not intended to be a full statistical report.

There are three stated aims for these awards in the literature received. These are:

(i) To recognise and reward the achievements of distinguished teachers. Fourteen institutions stated this.

(ii) To encourage teaching excellence in the academic staff. Thirteen institutions stated this.

(iii) To promote the value of teaching as an academic activity at the institution. Three institutions stated this.

Many of the awards follow a similar pattern. Usually there are about 1-4 awards given each year. In the few instances where there are a much higher number (say 10), the award is largely symbolic with little or no monetary award attached. Most awards are worth $5,000 or less. The breakdown for the 22 institutions who provided information about monetary value is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Monetary value attached to awards for teaching excellence at Australian universities

Value ($) for each award	Number of institutions
5,000	8
3,000	2
2,000	4
1,500	1
1,000	1
500	1
conference support	1
only certificate / small gift / plaque	4

Only 10 institutions stated that the award should be used for academic purposes for the further improvement of teaching. Only three institutions require the recipients of teaching awards to contribute in any way to educational development, e.g. through running a workshop for staff or making a presentation of some sort. Only two institutions link their teaching award scheme to some scheme which provides financial support for curriculum development for academic staff.

In most of the institutions all academic staff are eligible for these awards. Two institutions restrict nominees to below associate professor level (level D). One institution requires that two of its five annual awards are reserved for tutors (level A). One institution restricts the award to full-time academic staff only. Seven of the institutions specified that the nominees should have either two or three years' service. Usually some limits are placed on renomination of award recipients. Only three institutions mentioned that awards were available for course teams as well as for individuals.

Nomination is usually made by up to five people who are colleagues, students or recent former students of the nominee. The possibility of self-nomination was only mentioned in three cases. The nature of the submission to the selection committee is usually in the form of a curriculum vitae and supporting teaching dossier (or portfolio)

prepared by the nominee. There is some use of forms and questionnaires to standardise the collection of basic curriculum vitae information. Selection committees typically consist of about five people which includes one or two student representatives; the academic members of these committees are usually senior staff.

Of the institutions who replied with an active or proposed scheme for teaching awards, 12 provided an explicitly articulated set of criteria for judging excellence in teaching. The selection criteria articulated for the consideration of the selection committee were generally quite broadly based, though some institutions tended to concentrate on contact teaching skills more than others. The following set of criteria used by the Australian National University indicates the scope of the criteria which are used.

Set of criteria for teaching awards (Australian National University 1991 p. 1-2)

In judging excellence the selection panel will look for outstanding rather than satisfactory performance over a sustained period in *more than one* of the areas listed below:

- course design such as a new or revised degree / programme / unit;
- teaching large groups;
- teaching small groups;
- innovative teaching practices designed to improve the quality of learning or to respond creatively to changes in circumstances (e.g. larger classes).

The panel will consider some or all of the following further criteria:

1. Interest, enthusiasm and vitality in undertaking teaching and promoting student learning.
2. Interest in promoting the improvement of teaching through the development of innovative approaches and/or scholarship in teaching.
3. Command of subject matter and exploitation of recent developments in the field of study.

4. Keen and sympathetic participation in the guidance and advising of students and understanding of their needs.
5. Willingness to seek feedback from colleagues and students about teaching.
6. Ability to organise course material and present it cogently and imaginatively.
7. Provision of appropriate assessment with worthwhile feedback to students on their learning.
8. Ability to stimulate curiosity, independent learning and creativity in students.
9. Interest and involvement in promoting excellence in teaching among colleagues.
10. Evidence of successful supervision of honours and graduate students.

There is, of course, no evidence from this survey about how such criteria are actually used by the selection panels, or how particular items are valued.

Of the institutions which replied indicating an operational or proposed award scheme, only four stated reservations about the details of their existing practice. A composite list of these concerns is:

- There is too little student input.
- The scheme is a token gesture about teaching excellence.
- There is too much reliance on Deans to promote and administer the scheme.
- There are problems with the complexity and fairness of the procedure.
- The relationship of the teaching award scheme to promotion procedures is not clear.

Four institutions were undecided about the introduction of a teaching award scheme. Nine institutions have made a definite decision against

the introduction of schemes for teaching awards. Several of the replies were firmly worded. It was felt that rewards for teaching should be normal career rewards and that the emphasis should be on rewarding teaching through promotion procedures. Because of the small numbers of such awards, it was asserted that they provide no real incentive to the vast majority of staff and end up being cosmetic and superficial. They were considered to have no impact on overall teaching quality in higher education. Because they are usually for individuals, they were held to work against a cooperative model for curriculum development in higher education and could generate competitiveness and divisiveness. It was stated that they were inequitable and impractical. One observation was received that the experience in the USA was that teachers who received these awards did not receive tenure!

Two of these eight institutions have implemented schemes for awarding teaching grants instead and another one intends to implement a teaching grants scheme in 1992. These teaching grants enable staff to have time and resources to engage with a specific educational project. Of course, the process of being nominated for or receiving a teaching grant has an element of an award attached.

The teaching grant scheme to begin in 1992 for the Phillip Institute of Technology would allow time release for several academics, each on a $13,000 fellowship, in order to participate in staff development and undertake relevant curriculum development. This includes a responsibility allowance of $4,000 which appears to have the same function as a direct award. Indeed, the objectives of the proposal encompass the three aims stated above as well as hoping to fulfil other educational needs. The stated objectives are:

Objectives for teaching grants scheme at Phillip Institute of Technology (Ling 1991 p. 2)

- Encourage reflection by academic staff upon what constitutes quality in teaching.
- Recognise and reward high quality contributions to teaching.
- Identify peer models for teaching improvement.

- Provide opportunities for quality teachers to further develop teaching and evaluation strategies, curriculum design and educational materials.
- Stimulate teaching development in academic staff through workshops and modelling of teaching strategies.
- Facilitate exchange between institutions, of high quality approaches to teaching, through workshops, seminars and demonstration lessons.

Issues which arise from this survey

It is clear that there is support for teaching awards at the majority of Australian universities, though this is still a recent phenomenon. It is possible that longer experience with them will provoke reaction. Where they are used, they have been implemented with the belief that they recognise and reward excellent teachers, and also promote teaching excellence in general. In order to investigate how well the first of these aims is fulfilled one would need to examine the actual procedures within each institution in order to find out if selection procedures are as valid as possible. It is the second aim, about the promotion of teaching excellence in general, which appears to be more problematic. There is clearly some strong minority disquiet about the existence of teaching awards as they are presently constituted. This justifies examining the pros and cons of these awards and proposing a model of how such awards might be more constructively used to promote quality in higher education in Australia.

The discussion below will largely explore the aim that teaching awards can contribute to the promotion of teaching excellence in general. It will be assumed that institutions can fulfil the aim of recognising and rewarding excellent teachers. However, it is important to realise that the two aims could conflict with each other. It will be argued that recognising and rewarding excellent *teachers* may not be as beneficial to the aim of the promotion of teaching excellence as would be recognising and rewarding excellent *teaching*.

Benefits attributed to awards for teaching excellence

Pragmatism

There is a pragmatic value in having an actual reward programme rather than continuing to produce rhetoric about the need to value, reward and promote effective teaching. There is clearly a great deal of support for teaching awards. It may therefore be more productive to consider ways to improve a popular scheme than to discount its value altogether.

Public image of universities

Teaching awards provide valuable (and relatively inexpensive) publicity for universities. They project an image that teaching is of central concern within universities. This image is needed to attract prospective students.

Case studies of award winners portray academic life in a personalised way. This can assist people outside universities to see the broad scope of educational work which is undertaken in universities. A model for this sort of reporting has recently been produced by the AVCC (1991) which has solicited descriptions of teaching by 32 teachers judged to be excellent by their institutions.

Redressing an imbalance between teaching and research in higher education

These awards can be a step towards redressing the imbalance between the status of teaching and research in higher education. Sowey (1991 p. 3) uses the term "symmetry of regard for teaching and research" as a way of describing the growing awareness within universities of the need for equity in recognition of the value of teaching and research to the role of universities.

They are one way of portraying an image of academic life which sees teaching and research as being linked. Dunkin and Precians (1991) interviewed the winners of the Awards for Excellence in Teaching for 1989 and 1990 at the University of Sydney. Nine of the 11 interviewees commented on the interplay between teaching and research activities to the benefit of both types of activities. This is also clear in the AVCC (1991)

document mentioned above. This holistic image of academic life is appealing.

Criteria for defining and assessing quality in higher education

Teaching awards can provide a strategy for the progressive delineation of standards about what constitutes good teaching in higher education. There is a need for the building up of a series of case studies on two levels:

a) The evidence / criteria used by all the universities who have teaching awards. An example of one set of criteria was given earlier in this paper. Other institutions have criteria which focus more closely on classroom aspects of teaching. The patterns of criteria cover several aspects of teaching, both in terms of attitudes and strategies. The publicised debate about criteria for teaching awards could enrich the ongoing process of defining what is meant by quality in higher education.

b) The details of the actual individuals who have received these awards can also be studied (e.g. Dunkin 1991 on the University of Sydney awards). In particular, the range of learning theories which university teachers use can be explored, as can the strategies they use to enact these theoretical models. Their interactional responsiveness with students and their attitudes to feedback can also be examined. These portrayals should show that effective teaching is a complex and sensitive interpersonal situation and therefore that strategies for effective teaching cannot be prescribed.

Case studies on award winners may also assist other individuals in higher education by providing role models. This process is obviously greatly enhanced when award winners are involved in staff development work themselves as a consequence of their awards, as occurs in three of the institutions in this survey.

There is an another advantage to a more public debate about what constitutes good teaching. Many academics feel threatened by the thought of seeing their teaching activities as being open to scrutiny and debate in the same way as research activities are. There is a sense that teaching is a more private activity than research and this assumption needs to be

opened up. Because teaching is such a complex interpersonal activity, this is an area which requires a sensitive approach.

Issues of accountability

There are clear links between teaching awards and issues of accountability for academics. If the awards are based on clear criteria about excellence in teaching, then the progressive refinement of these criteria will clarify the issue about what it is that university teachers could perhaps be held accountable for. These awards can thus provide valuable experience which can be fed into the current discussions on accountability at an institutional level and individual staff appraisal.

Course evaluations are now essential at many institutions and student assessments are often a significant aspect of course evaluations. These criteria about what constitutes excellence in teaching could be of value to students as criteria against which to make assessments of the teaching they encounter.

Links to promotion procedures

These awards can be seen as supporting moves within promotions procedures to give more credence to teaching. Anwyl, Balla and McInnis (1991) describe how new procedure guides at the University of Melbourne detail the way evidence about teaching should be covered. These detailed guidelines are now presented for applicants, heads of departments and promotion committee members.

In general, the moves to emphasise quality in higher education need to be seen in relation to each other. Seen in this way, awards for teaching excellence may well be an effective adjunct to other policy changes in Australian universities.

Problems associated with awards for teaching excellence

Pragmatism

Many academic staff are sceptical about these awards because they feel they are cosmetic gestures which do not address very real problems of shrinking resources and decreasing staff / student ratios.

Awards will not motivate staff who are not interested in teaching at all. That is certainly true for the relatively inexpensive awards which are currently available. At the other end of the teaching spectrum, it must be recognised that a university teaching award can be given to only a few of the very best teachers. Not many, even from the level of quite talented and experienced teachers, are likely to strive for so exclusive an award.

Public image of universities

Higher education is now very much in the public eye, largely because of the huge growth in student numbers and costs during the past few years. There is very real public concern about the adequacy of facilities and educational quality in huge first year classes. Too much publicity around a few individual teachers could well be construed as an attempt to divert attention from these issues. A cynical public could expect that award money would be better spent on the provision of facilities for students.

Redressing an imbalance between teaching and research in higher education

If rewards for teaching and research are to be comparable, then the status of both sorts of activities and the range and type of financial rewards available for each should be considered. Sowell (1990 p. 68) bluntly states: "Money talks in academia as elsewhere, and what that money says on most campuses is 'do research'".

It is also questionable whether, in the existing climate of universities, these awards could be effective in raising the status of teaching at universities. Many academics do not want to be labelled as 'good' teachers; they may see teaching awards as 'a kiss of death' to their research images (Sowell 1990). The prestige of research forms a strong

culture within many universities and this culture persists in the face of official statements about the importance of teaching. The comment noted above about the difficulties faced by American award winners in obtaining tenure fits in with this viewpoint.

Teaching and research involve different skills. However, within an academic context, good teaching involves more than expert delivery and explanation skills. Reflection and sharing of experience are also needed and these are research skills. Current views of learning see learning as contextual, as involving an ongoing process of exploration and dialogue, as being a journey rather than a destination. The idea of seeing an academic's role in teaching and learning as being effectively separated from some research activity does seem problematic. There are a myriad of ways in which an academic can play out both teaching and research roles and there is a real need to define the breadth and complexity of these roles much more clearly. Teaching awards need to recognise this complexity. At present they do not.

Criteria for defining and assessing quality in higher education

While the majority of Australian universities which have teaching award schemes state that the improvement of teaching quality is a specific aim distinct from the recognition and rewarding of excellent teachers, it is not clear how individual institutions prioritise these aims. Or indeed, how they see these award schemes, as they are presently constituted, as fulfilling the aim of improving teaching quality.

There is the risk of trivialising teaching by promoting a set of superficial criteria. University teachers can show creative expertise in a variety of ways - in curriculum design, in lecture presentation, in interactive work with students in tutorials and laboratory classes, in supervising higher degree students etc. Even if broadly based criteria are written, there is a danger that presentation skills will be over-represented in any selection procedure.

Academics are at various levels of competence in various facets of their teaching. The issue here about improving quality is that the improvement of quality is not to some absolute standard, but rather is a relative concept involving change within individuals to acquire new skills and perspectives about their teaching. There is an ongoing need to

provide incentive and support to all staff. Most of the existing teaching award schemes do not indicate awards for different academic levels.

Any plan for staff development should involve an emphasis on educational groups within the universities (Bowden 1991). These groups could be whole departments or course teams within departments. Effective educational change occurs when the multitude of skills involved in curriculum design and implementation come together in an organised fashion. Awards to individuals cuts right across this desirable cooperative ethos.

Issues of accountability

In the current adversarial staff-management circumstances it is unlikely that teaching awards would be seen as isolated from the other issues of promotion, appraisal and efficiency and quality audits. There is widespread union and perhaps membership resistance to the 'carrot and stick' mentality of awards and appraisal. Excellence in teaching will not be achieved by these strategies; what is needed is an increasing commitment to providing resources for teaching and curriculum development within a climate that sees teaching as an integral and valued part of academic life.

Links to promotion procedures

Promotion procedures are the appropriate avenue for rewarding academic staff. Putting energy into changing attitudes about what should be valued for promotion is more important than giving a few annual 'token' teaching awards.

Some ideas for improving the value of teaching award schemes

This information on existing teaching awards at Australian universities and the compilation of arguments for and against them suggests that there is scope for refashioning them so that any claim about their effects are credible.

It may be possible to develop a way of thinking and talking about how teaching is valued, which deals with the criticisms of some existing

schemes and results in reward schemes with wider appeal. This could involve:

• *Emphasising the cooperative nature of university teaching.* Awards for successful teaching innovations within departments could be given more frequently to course teams. The project could be publicised, the individuals involved would receive some recognition and the award money could be ploughed back into further educational work in the department. Indeed, it seems sensible that teaching award money, like research grants, should be used for academic purposes. The idea of prize money which is not academically tagged seems unacceptable in times of fewer resources in higher education.

If awards are given to course teams rather than individuals, then one can include general staff who often put a great deal of creative effort into teaching programmes. Administrative and technological aspects of student support are often neglected and yet they are essential to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

• *Providing adequate support for innovations in university teaching.* A scheme for teaching awards will not be effective if it is implemented in a resource vacuum, or if the recipient is seen to be an eccentric or isolate in an academic department. Academics need to receive time release, professional pedagogical and technological advice, adequate financial and technical support and cooperation from their colleagues and heads of departments in order to achieve successful and substantial curriculum change.

Using recipients of teaching awards in staff development programmes as mentors or workshop leaders provides recognition and disseminates valuable ideas and experience. Obviously there is a continuum from giving a workshop to having substantial time release such as in the teaching grants scheme outlined earlier in this paper.

• *Emphasising the interplay between various aspects of academic work.* The inclusion of criteria in award schemes which assert the value of the using research skills and knowledge in teaching would be useful. Incorporating research strategies or techniques and

current research ideas, problems and hypotheses in undergraduate courses, or demonstrating the fruits of an active engagement in educational research are examples of practices which could be recognised and rewarded.

• *Limiting the size of the claim about what awards for teaching excellence are likely to achieve.* Recognising distinguished teaching achievement is a laudable end in itself; it is highly arguable whether instituting teaching awards will produce behavioural change in sundry other academics or promote overall educational excellence in an institution. After all the prime object of most research rewards is not to encourage other academics but to pay homage to brilliant achievement. But if other unintended but worthwhile side effects should be produced in teaching or research who should complain?

Teaching awards are latecomers to Australian universities; they are a phenomenon of the new industrial scene in Australian higher education, post-1988 (often called the Dawkins era). Of course, awards are an evolving form and if they develop in the manner just described they could become more acceptable to Australian academics.

In Western universities generally there is a clearly discernible movement to readjust the teaching / research balance, and universities need to think much more creatively about teaching awards and their place in a package of strategies targeted at the improvement of university teaching and learning.

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